

In Memoriam: John Prados

In April 1982, CIA Deputy Director for Intelligence Robert Gates sent a memo to his boss, Director William Casey, with copies to the agency's deputy director and half a dozen heads of key analytical offices. The subject was "John Prados Book *The Soviet Estimate*." Gates reminded everyone that he had previously referred the book to several of them. Calling it a "reasonably fair minded account—and at times an insightful one," Gates urged his colleagues to study it "for whatever lessons we might take from it in terms of improving our record with respect to predicting Soviet force capabilities."

Attached to the DDI's memo was a letter, eight pages in length, from veteran Soviet strategic forces watcher Howard Stoertz, whom Gates had asked to assess the book. Stoertz had the same reaction: "it should be recommended reading for all analysts and estimators working the field of Soviet military affairs; and it would be of interest to those involved with Soviet affairs and estimating in general."

Stoertz had his criticisms. He pointed out some flaws in information and argument and balked at the author's "troubling tendency to mix excellent insights with dark suspicions about the motives and actions of intelligence officials involved in the estimative process." Overall, though, John had pegged the 25-year history of CIA estimating "about right," including identifying "substantial overestimates and underestimates on critical issues." Stoertz admitted it was "a humbling experience to read at one sitting."

Even if Gates had just been trying to light a fire under the agency's Soviet analysts by comparing their output to that of an outsider with no access to classified material, it was an unusual compliment for a budding scholar who had just turned 31 and didn't yet have his doctorate.

I don't know if John ever saw these presumably grudging tributes, but since they were declassified in 2007 and are now posted in the CIA's electronic Freedom of Information Act Reading Room, it's likely that he did. If so, it's easy to imagine him reacting, a quarter century or more after the fact, with a mix of pride at having turned a few heads at the top levels of the CIA, and frustration (though surely not surprise) at how little had changed inside that community.

John Prados died on November 29, 2022, after four decades of investigating, assessing, and enlightening the public about the world of intelligence and other, often hidden dimensions of U.S. foreign policy, as well as the impact and implications of United States power. He was a true character, an iconoclast, especially within the domains he chose to study, who left a record of accomplishment that is hard to convey in a single appreciation.

Fortunately, he was well known to many readers of this newsletter, which makes the task far easier. Many of his fellow SHAFR members have already registered their admiration. Lloyd Gardner saw him as "a master historian." Jim Hershberg called him "stupendously prolific" and Bob McMahon praised his "astounding level of scholarly productivity."

John was born in Queens, New York, on January 9, 1951—sharing his birthdate with Richard Nixon, as John's *New York Times* obit pointed out. His family moved to Puerto Rico where his father had been from originally, but he came back to New York after high school to enroll at Columbia

University. Whether or not he went there *because* it was one of the epicenters of student upheaval over Vietnam, CIA abuses, and Watergate, it undoubtedly helped shape his intellectual thinking and moral sensibilities in those tumultuous times. As Bob McMahon wrote in his tribute for H-Diplo:

He was, and remained always, a 60s-era idealist, a person whose strong sense of morality and deep-seated commitment to human rights and responsible government underlay much of his scholarship. No one in our field has ever insisted with more conviction than John that policy makers must be held to the highest standards and that they must be called out when they fall short.

I got to know John starting in the late 1990s when he joined my organization, the National Security Archive, as a senior fellow. I had first met him in the mid-1980s when I was new to the Archive myself and he was part of a rarified (to me) circle of scholars, journalists, and information advocates whose shared frustration at perpetually being stifled by the federal government in their attempts to pry open the documentary record (primarily through FOIA) helped lead to the idea for the Archive, spearheaded by former *Washington Post* reporter Scott Armstrong, as a public repository of declassified documentation.

The Archive opened its doors just a few years after the *Soviet Estimate* became semi-required reading at CIA. By the time he formally signed on with us he had several more publications, each notable in its own right. By the time he died, he had written 27 books, some translated into other languages, plus many dozens of articles and book chapters.

The sweep of his scholarship was truly impressive, including deeply researched treatments of key moments in World War II, the Vietnam War, and later the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Mostly he concentrated on the intelligence aspects of U.S. policy, but the military and diplomatic dimensions were always prominently featured. Some of his books are high-altitude analyses, for instance his surveys of CIA and Pentagon operations (*President's Secret Wars* and *Safe for Democracy*) and the history of the National Security Council (*Keepers of the Keys*), which are still classic references. Others are big picture accounts designed to give context to events that suffer from being misleadingly viewed in isolation (e.g., *America Confronts Terrorism*).

Still other works are microscopically detailed studies of events and issues whose significance John believed was underappreciated by scholars. *Islands of Destiny* argued that while most people assumed that the leadup to the Battle of Midway was a turning point in the Pacific War, it was ultimately not as decisive as the chipping away of Japanese control of the Solomon Islands. *A Streetcar Named Pleiku* delved into a National Liberation Front attack in South Vietnam's Central Plateau in early 1965 – believed by Washington to have been planned in Hanoi to coincide with a visit by national security adviser McGeorge Bundy, but in reality an almost random strike ordered by local commanders – which prompted the initiation of the U.S. bombing campaign of the North. The catchy title played off a remark by Bundy suggesting that flashpoints like Pleiku are always coming down the line and will take you (or U.S.

policy) wherever you want (it) to go.

Vietnam was also the subject of one of John's most acclaimed books, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975*, a formidable piece of research and analysis that many of his fellow Vietnam specialists agree has been one of the most important volumes yet produced on the conflict. It put many of John's skills on display – the deep exploration of archives, detailed argumentation, and vivid style. It also was an archetype of his drive – if not mission – to dispel erroneous accounts or interpretations that cloud our understanding of events of global importance. In this case, he was clinically precise in building the still unassailable argument that, in part because of realities such as the limited number of ports and landing fields in South Vietnam capable of handling the supplies needed to feed the U.S. war effort, “the factors necessary to achieve victory simply were not present.”

John was a master at detecting patterns and following threads from earlier periods to modern times in ways that threw new explanatory light on complex topics like battlefield strategies and tactics, the intelligence process, and the dynamics of presidential decision-making. Just in the intelligence sphere, *The Ghosts of Langley*, *William Colby and the CIA*, and *Family Jewels* are prime examples.

For his accomplishments, he won many accolades. His awards include the Henry Adams prize from the Society for History in the Federal Government (*Unwinnable War*), the annual book prize of the New York Military Affairs Symposium (*Combined Fleet Decoded*), the book prize of the Consortium for the Study of Intelligence (Soviet Estimate), and two selections by the U.S. Naval Institute as a Notable Naval Book of the Year. His publishers submitted four of his books for the Pulitzer Prize.

His colleagues in the field were equally fulsome. In the pages of this newsletter, Richard Immerman counted him “among the very few US historians” responsible for laying the ground for the study of intelligence history. Kathryn Olmsted and Hugh Wilford agreed, Wilford calling him “extraordinarily prolific.” In addition to the previously cited tributes on H-Diplo, scholars and a fair share of government information professionals—despite his thousands of access requests over the years – have sent warm messages and recollections to John's family and to the Archive.

John aspired to do more than just write credible history. He had what amounted to a calling to impart meaningful lessons to his readers about the epic events (and, frequently, catastrophes) that were his subjects. Describing his purpose in publishing *The Ghosts of Langley*, he wrote that thanks to a compliant President Obama, the CIA was able to commit “excesses [that] have only been exceeded by its efforts to evade responsibility for what it did. This was the really important story.”

He also had a passion for creating teachable moments and providing students in particular with the raw materials to study and learn from history. *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know* and *How the Cold War Ended: Debating and Doing History* stand out. The latter was as much a how-to guide for future scholars as it was an effort to tackle a complicated and contentious historical debate – something else John loved to do and excelled at.

Virtually every project he took on at the National Security Archive had a strong educational component to it as well. He produced seven major document collections as part of the Digital National Security Archive series—large-scale publications averaging 2,500 records apiece that represent major resources for students and scholars. Two more sets featuring mostly previously unpublished records on the management of CIA clandestine operations are in the queue. His many “e-books”—annotated primary source compilations on our website that professors love to assign—covered events from the Diem coup of November

1963, to the official release of the “full” Pentagon Papers in 2011, to the JFK-approved plot to oust Cheddi Jagan in British Guiana in 1964, to the Bush-43 propaganda campaign surrounding the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (also the subject of his widely applauded volume *Hoodwinked*). John even turned his essay for H-Diplo's excellent “Scholar's Craft” series into a mini-seminar on methodology.

A side of John that many people were not aware of was that he was a hard-core “wargamer.” He didn't just play them, he designed them—and he was phenomenal at it. Well before he raised eyebrows at Langley with his historiography, he was inventing and publishing wargames that have made him a shining star in the gaming community to this day. Among dozens of titles reflecting the expected Prados breadth are a Roman-era battle game set in the forests of Germany called “The Victory of Arminius;” “Look Away, the Fall of Atlanta, 1864;” “Khe Sanh, 1968;” “Crisis Sinai: The Yom Kippur War, 1973;” and “Panzerkrieg.” He won more than half a dozen awards, including for his most celebrated design, “Third Reich,” published when he was just 23 years old. It remains one of the best-selling wargames of all time. Remarkable.

As with his bibliography, John's gaming achievements brought admiration from his peers. (For one appreciation, by fellow historian and wargame enthusiast Leopoldo Nuti, see the H-Diplo tribute.) Emblematic of the sentiment among pure gamers, the publisher Against the Odds sent out a notice in January 2023 announcing John's passing but also declaring January to be “JOHN-uary” in his honor, noting that he had published more games with ATO than any other company. “We are proud of that,” the message added. How many of us can boast that kind of distinction?

The missing dimension so far in this column is John's personal side, which offers some insights into his approach to his profession. His family was of course extremely important in his life. His partner of 25 years, Ellen Pinzur, shared a passion with him for the experiences of Vietnam war veterans. He had two daughters, Dani and Tasha, from an earlier marriage to Jill Gay.

Everyone who knew John likely has a vivid mental image of some classic moment involving John. Before anything else, visually, there was ... the ponytail—tightly bound with two rubber bands—paired with the bushy mustache. As noted, a child of the 60s. He preferred jeans and maybe a leather vest though he had no problem putting on a tie and jacket when required. But he always stood out thanks to that signature haircut. So prominent was it that Robert McNamara, a frequent object of John's critical attention, and with whom he participated in an extraordinary conference in Hanoi in 1997, took to calling him simply “That Ponytail Guy.”

Most of the personal recollections sent to the Archive since last November focus on his lighter side: his fondness of conversation—from baseball to almost anything else—preferably with a beer in hand, but even more so his enjoyment for what could be described as shop talk—virtually any political or historical topic, current events, research methods, the state of FOIA, you name it. If you wanted to argue, he was perfectly fine with that, too. Fred Logevall said (half-jokingly) that he sometimes found him intimidating, especially as a questioner at a panel discussion, but that there was always a warmth to him that came out easily. While he was passionate about his principles, supremely confident in his point of view, proud of his achievements, and ready to defend them—sometimes to the point of stubbornness—one could also regularly witness his genuine modesty, his willingness to hear out an alternative theory (but in the end it better be sound), even his desire to know about any mistakes that might have crept into his writings. He was unfailingly generous with his time and expertise, whether with a senior colleague or an intern, and as an Archive standard bearer he was tireless.

Other colleagues remember John's commendable intolerance of "unpleasantries" like gratuitous displays of superiority, political obtuseness, or willful ignorance. His impatience extended to any hint of condescension or disrespect, especially from anyone in a position of influence or power.

In that connection, I recently received a vignette that beautifully epitomizes this facet of John. It came in an email from longtime mutual friends and colleagues Jim Blight and Janet Lang, who invented the concept of "critical oral history," an innovative methodology that has produced stupendous evidentiary results (and which the Archive and others have adopted often) in reexamining world-changing episodes such as the Cuban missile crisis, the American war in Vietnam, Carter-Brezhnev and the collapse of détente, and the thorny U.S.-Iran relationship.

It was at the aforesaid 1997 conference in Hanoi that McNamara and Prados made their awkward acquaintance. Jim and Janet got to know McNamara intimately over the course of several retrospective projects. During his years in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, the former whiz kid was known as the "Electronic Brain," but to those of us who were part of the Vietnam project he was always "Maximum Bob." Here are J & J's recollection of that memorable encounter.

Bob wasn't just bad with names, he had some sort of cognitive tic that made non-standard, non-Anglo names difficult for him to remember. He tried a couple of times to use JP's name, but it came out something like, "Pray-dose." So in addition to JP's status, in McNamara-ese as "Ponytail Guy," JP became "the eccentric." The problem was that Bob for some reason couldn't say "eccentric." It always came out "ass-entric." At some point, we alerted JP to his elevated status as "ass-entric." We remember once in particular in Hanoi when Bob was feeling in an expansive mood, he invited JP to come into a side conversation we were having with him. To break the ice, Bob the diplomat said something along the lines of, "you're the ass-entric guy on our team, you know." JP raised an eyebrow, looked toward us for clarification and, receiving none, replied, "you're pretty ass-entric yourself." Well, after all, one of us said, it takes one to know one, doesn't it? Three of us knew why that exchange was funny; one did not. It was a beautiful thing.

Great stuff.

What stands out for me about John is that despite his unabashedly lefty political outlook and the adamance of his convictions—opprobrium for militarism, for the avoidable tragedies of Vietnam and Iraq, for the excesses of the powerful—he had the genuine respect of all sides. He won awards from U.S. military organizations and government historians, glowing reviews from establishment conservatives and liberals alike—not to mention a measure of deference at the CIA.

Even the likes of Bob McNamara, once he got past the ponytail, appreciated the value John added to the proceedings. John managed that feat through his distinctive skills as a historian, unquestioned seriousness of purpose, commitment to the truth and to following the evidence, his ability to set aside personal politics, and his utter fearlessness in standing up for principle.

John has left a profound impact on the field and a high personal and professional standard to follow.

Malcolm Byrne